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THE PROBLEM OF METHOD IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

I

THE fundamental problem of Religious Education is that of the connection between the Word of God and the human soul. This problem can be easily settled either by placing the Word on a human level and identifying it with human aims, or by looking upon the soul with the optimistic thought that it is capable of accepting the Word. But if we will neither deprive the Word of its absoluteness nor admit man to be capable of accepting it, we get among humanly insurmountable difficulties. These difficulties arise on two sides : on the side of the Word and on the side of the human soul.

On the one side it is obvious that Reformed Theology can never admit that *the Word* can be *relative*. It cannot consider the Word of God as depending on man, nor can it replace it with human thoughts. In the Word, God Himself is speaking ; and Religious Education cannot be contented with conveying to the child some religious thoughts or ideas about God or awakening religious sentiments, for these are not the Word. On the contrary every such work is an offending of the majesty of God. The Word is a deed of God, and Religious Education has to speak to the child about this deed. For this reason it is impossible to bring the knowledge of God on to the same level with any other kind of knowledge. The Word is a deed of God also in the sense that through it God is working in the soul. He creates an answer to His Word in the soul and this answer is again not the work of man but of God. God alone is able to secure the result education is trying to achieve by the human work which is unable to do it. So from the human side there is no way to secure the result of education. God is sovereign in preaching His Word, He speaks it to whom He is willing to speak and He causes it to be accepted by those who are ordered for it.

On the other side we have to state that *the soul is* of itself *unable* to know and to accept the will of God. Here we have to reckon with the fact, not sufficiently considered by modern psychology, of the corruption of human nature. Because of sin man is not only unable to know the will of God but he is even

inclined to exchange and mistake the Word for human thoughts and to put it to his own service.¹ This fact lifts a high wall between man and the Word. Therefore even in cases when education is trying to preach the Word of God and even when it tries to preach it soundly, the sounder this Word is preached the more unapproachable it will be for man. In this point there lies the difference between the two conceptions of the aim of Religious Education. If the aim is to preach the Word of God, we find that because of the corruptness of human nature the Word is and remains alien to the human soul, till in another case the soul is fully capable of accepting religious teachings, sentiments or values if this is fixed as the aim in educational work.

The case will be more difficult if we consider another fact. The Word is preached in order to cause in the soul a decision to the side of God : *conversion*. Now we find that although education can be able to show to the child, by means of some ideas, a conception of or, by means of some sentiments, the influence of conversion, it is utterly unable to convert it. The question will be more hopeless if we consider that the psychological means, the knowledge of the child's soul, *do not render psychology able to answer even the question what the true meaning and essence of conversion is but only to describe the appearances with which the action and event of conversion is surrounded in the soul*. Modern psychology, uncertain in its method of examining only the outward appearances of the human soul,² could give only an insufficient foundation for Religious Education even if it were not the fact that in conversion we are facing a mysterious and unexplainable deed of God which we are unable even to describe, still less to explain. If psychology has not got the means to know man in his true essence—this knowledge being got only from Revelation—this science cannot play a decisive role in our work.³

These two conditions, the absoluteness of the Word and the powerlessness of human soul, show that we have to reckon with weakness of every human method. There are only two ways before Religious Education : either to be content with the lofty

¹ Pfennigsdorf : *Wie lehren wir Evangelium ?* p. 247.

² Heckel : *Zur Methodik des ev. Religionsunterrichts*, p. 34. Jessop : " Psychology and Religion," *EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, 1931.

³ F. Ch. Coetzee : " Religious Education," *EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY*, Vol. 7, p. 253.

task of preaching the Word of God and nothing else, or disregarding the difference between the Word and the human soul, to take the risk of putting human means between the soul and the Word, which means, lying under the burden of human weakness and sin, become hindrances to the work of God in the soul of the child. Undertaking the former way, education has to consider that even in preaching the Word it is standing before an impossibility and is taking up an audacious task, and being human work, limited and powerless, education can stand only under the condition that God works. The antagonism between the child and the eternal Word, and the task that we have to preach it in spite of our unfitness, refer to the fact that the whole work of Education and its method, too, are *under the judgment of God*, kept under the lock of sin and weakness, and education is possible only if we acknowledge this judgment. For the method, this means that not the teacher but the Holy Spirit of God is the agent in the work and that the way and method of education can be deduced not from human theories but from the demand of God in His Word. So education is, properly speaking, the work of God in which He makes use of the teacher according to His own will.

If Religious Education is actually the preaching of the Word its method can be got only by observing how the Word is working in the soul. Here the first thing to be stated is that *education should not be identified with the Gospel*. In the New Testament we find three different kinds of things : the preaching (kerygma), the message of salvation (euangelion) and the teaching (didaskien) which refers to the keeping of Christ's commandments (Matthew xxviii. 19).¹ Through the preaching and hearing, the Word may lead to conversion by faith. Education as the means of preaching the Word is unable to produce faith or to effect conversion in the child ; this is the work of grace, independent of any human action. As to the problem of method, therefore, we have first of all to state that this depends entirely on the work of grace, which statement makes the range and importance of education doubtless much narrower than it was considered to have been.

Examining now the way of the Word in the soul, we find that this way is by no means without system and rule. Although

¹ Merz : " Die Voraussetzungen der ev. Erziehungsarbeit," *Zwischen den Zeiten*, Vol. VIII, pp. 475-6.

the effect of preaching on the soul is dependent entirely on God, education has to be acquainted with the *preliminary conditions* which God gave in this respect. Three such conditions are to be taken into consideration. First of these is *Baptism*. In Baptism we have a token and a seal that God acknowledges the child as His own property¹ and that He is going to give him His mercy. Baptism makes us certain that the children baptized “renovari Dei Spiritu pro aetatis modulo, donec per gradus suo tempore quae in illis occulta est virtus augetur et palam refulgeat”.² Through Baptism the teacher is ensured that God is keeping the elect child in His own hands by His Holy Spirit and is leading him through faith and contrition to the knowledge of His mercy. Without Baptism the work of education is vain and useless, its destiny is uncertain, being a human effort which in the best case can be helped by God.

The second condition of our work is *Election*.³ Election is made obvious to us through Baptism which is a token of Election. The child in our hands is the property of God, redeemed by His Son and in this redemption is the possibility and guarantee that God is willing to give him the blessings of the Word. That is what Calvin says in the explanation of Matthew xix. 14: In this “testatur se velle pueros admittere et tandem in ulnas receptos non modo complectitur, sed manuum impositione benedicit: unde colligimus, ad hanc quoque aetatem extendi eius gratiam”.⁴ For the method of education this signifies that every decision in the soul of the child, awakened by education, has its source in the grace of God and is dependent on the same.⁵

The third condition is to be found in the *orders and instructions* which we read in the Bible and in the Confessions of our Church. All these instructions unanimously oblige the Church to teach the children who belong to her in the law of God, in order that they may get a sound education through being taught in the precepts of God in the Confession and about the Sacraments.⁶ The Heidelberg Catechism in its 103rd question emphasizes, as one of the means of worship, the keeping of schools in which

¹ Pfennigsdorf: *ibid.*, p. 248.

² Calvin: *Commentarius*, ed. Arnstæd, Vol. II, p. 161. Merz: *op. cit.*, p. 482. Heckel: *Die Christl. Erziehung, Zwischen den Zeiten*, Vol. VIII, p. 261.

³ F. Ch. Coetze: *op. cit.*, p. 264.

⁴ Calvin: *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 161.

⁵ Pfennigsdorf: *Prakt. Theologie*, p. 248. Niebergall: *Die neuen Wege Kirchlicher Arbeit*, p. 50.

⁶ *Confessio Helvetica Posterior*, xxv. 1.

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the children should be taught in the true knowledge of the Word.¹

From these conditions we find that in education we can reckon on the work of God who, without any human additions and independent of such, already established the conditions necessary for the preaching of the Word. This, on the one hand, ensures us that God is willing to have the Word preached to the child; on the other hand it puts before us this preaching as an obligation which cannot be laid aside.

From these considerations we arrive at the following result: If Religious Education is not able to guarantee the efficaciousness of the Word, if it is not its task to produce conversion in the soul, its task is simply to *preach* and with this preaching to *refer to the Word*. The method has to seek the forms in which God gives His message even to the child to prepare the way for the Word, although the effect of this preparation properly speaking is also beyond the power of education. In this respect the task of Paedagogics agrees with that of other branches of practical theology dealing with the problem of preaching, except that in its method there is this difference, that *education is looking for the ways in which this must be preached to the child and to the youth*. This gives us the special method of education in which it differs from Homiletics and cure of souls. In education we must bring ourselves to the level of the life of the child and of the youth, to be acquainted with their questions, with their psychology, and to do this not only in matters of secondary importance but on the ground of that only question put before them by Christ: "Whom say ye that I am?" Education has to show to the child and youth among the forms and categories of his understanding conception, phantasy and will one thing: the demanding and compelling claim of God. All the knowledge about the soul and all the application to it has only one task: to render it possible for us and to enable us to preach the Word to the child so that he may see in it the judgment and mercy of God.

Here arises the question if method cannot make the Word efficacious in the soul of the child, if its only task is to preach it and its efficacy depends only on the work of the Holy Spirit, *has method any use or role in education?* Modern Religious Education is often reproached with under-estimating method,

¹ Ursinus: *The Source of Christian Catechism*, London, 1611, p. 994.

² Thurneysen: *Das Wort Gottes u. die Kirche*, München, 1927, pp. 161-2.

and this under-estimating is always just where method is considered as above the Word and able to influence or even to serve as a substitute for its work. It would be a great mistake, however, to give up method entirely. Method can never become an idol if we will not make it a hindrance in the work of God, but as far as it is not an idol, so far it must be used as a means without which we cannot work, although its existence is dependent upon the Word. Its task is to direct our attention continually to the Word preached and to the child to whom it is preached and to the fact that this work of preaching has necessarily a way which, although as a human action it must be used and it has its place provided, yet remains in its own circle and does not try to step in the way of the Word. Every method can exist only under the condition of grace, for grace alone gives to method possibility, authority and strength.¹ Thus if we saw that the method as well as the teacher himself are standing under the judgment of God, their unfitness being derived from human sin and weakness, and they being unable to release themselves from it, now we have to say that this deliverance is possible only by grace if method looks on itself and on its work not as independent, but as standing by grace only. As the end of the law is Christ, "*quidquid doceat Lex, quidquid praeceptat, quidquid promittat, semper Christum habet pro scopo : ergo in ipsum dirigendae sunt omnes partes*"—so *the end, the fulfilment of the method, is Christ Himself*, all human efforts, in themselves *weak and insufficient, are justified and fulfilled* in Him alone through faith in His redeeming and regenerating grace and become thus means for the work of the Spirit. This is *the judgment* and at the same time also *the glory* of the method, and only in this faith can the method of education become a true means of the preaching of the Word of God.

II

Let us now seek the ways in which education has to preach the Word to the young and to the children. If we turn to the New Testament we find three forms in which the Word is preached.

¹ Merz : *op. cit.*, p. 480.

² Calvin : *Commentarius*, Vol. V, p. 155.

1. *Firstly*, the preaching of the Word is standing before us as *doctrine* (didache), which expression can be often read in the Gospel and in the Epistles (Matthew xvi. 12 ; Acts ii. 42 ; Rom. xvi. 17 ; 2 Timothy iii. 16, iv. 3 ; Matthew xxviii. 19). This is the doctrine of Christ of which He is telling us that it is not His own but His that sent Him (John vii. 16), about which Christ is asked by the high priest (John xviii. 19) ; it is the doctrine of the apostles (Acts ii. 42), the soundness of which must be kept (Romans xvi. 17 ; 2 Timothy iv. 3), which is the same as the doctrine of Christ (2 John ix. 11). This doctrine is taught by Christ (Matthew v. 2) in the Sermon on the Mount, it also speaks about the suffering of the Son of Man (Mark ix. 31) ; this was preached in the synagogue at Nazareth as He spoke about the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke iv. 16-21), teaching the way of God in truth. This is the sound doctrine (Titus i. 9) to which everybody has to conform. This doctrine seems to be new (Mark i. 27) in contrast with the doctrine of the Pharisees and Scribes (Matthew xvi. 12) and of the heathen (Acts xvii. 19). The faithful are taught by the Holy Spirit in this doctrine all things (John xiv. 26). The apostles teach on the basis of the commission received from Christ (Matthew xxviii. 19), all nations are to observe all things whatsoever Christ commanded. The doctrine is therefore a knowledge given in a fixed form communicated to the people by means of teaching and this doctrine contains everything which we have to know about Christ and His redeeming death and about His mercy. This is contrary to the false doctrine by the fact that the false doctrine does not derive from Christ, does not speak the truth of God, but comes from a human source and speaks of results of a human spirit.

So if we speak of *teaching* as a way to preach the Word we must state that this teaching is *not* a conveying of *human wisdom* and *not* a heap of *human theories*. It does not speak about human things, but of *the revelation of God* through Christ. As to its form, we see that it is *teaching a doctrine* independent of human opinion and human values. This points out a long-neglected thought in Religious Education, namely the importance of the doctrine. Orthodoxy saw clearly this point ; its mistake was that in the place of the Word of God as Christian doctrine was put the true teaching of the Church, and so the pure Word was identified with the human understanding of it.¹

¹ Brunner : *Um die Erneuerung der Kirche*, Bern, 1934, p. 20.

Teaching, however, as a form of education has *its limits*, too. The true task of teaching is laid down in Matthew xxviii. 19, where the disciples are given the commission: “*Go and teach all nations to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you.*” This shows that in education neither the doctrine nor its teaching can stand for themselves; their duty is not to convey abstract knowledge in order to increase the material of knowledge; their task is to teach the child *to learn to observe what Christ commanded him*. The end and fulfilment of doctrine is, therefore, Christ; grace appeared in Him, and the end of the teaching is obedience to this grace. From this it follows that teaching can never be the only method of education, its work is always limited, referring to another form as well, as doctrine is of importance in education when it rises above the forms of human words and expressions to the Word of God. Doctrine has to become life, and teaching has to become a guidance to obedience, or else both will remain simple and empty frames. This is the only way and sense in which teaching can be used in education.

2. The second form in which the Word of God is addressing man is the form of *precept, law, order* (nomos, entolé). God’s law is in the Old Testament, which is therefore called also the Law. This law contains the demand of God which He requires of His people. The law comprehends wholly and entirely the will of God. His claim laid on those belonging to Him, founded on the fact that He is holy and His people should be holy, too. Therefore the law is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good (Romans vii. 12), in contrast with man who is sinful and unjust; the law is spiritual in contrast with man, who is carnal. Through the commandment sin revives (Romans vii. 9), through the law sin becomes exceedingly sinful (Romans vii. 13), for God’s holy and true will is contained in it. Therefore the commandment is from God (John x. 18), in spite of human traditions (Mark vii. 9) which are sinful and transitory compared with it. God orders His children to walk in His commandments (Luke i. 6), to obey Him, to seek their delight in the law of the Lord, and to meditate in it day and night (Psalm i. 3). The law and the commandment are life everlasting (John xii. 50); their essence is in the New Testament in love to God out of which love towards our neighbours springs. This is a new law, being

addressed to souls renewed in Christ, and it contains every commandment (John xiii. 24, xv. 12; 1 John ii. 7, iii. 23; Matthew xxii. 40).

As to *the form* of the commandment, it regulates the whole life, the conduct of man in every situation. It gives orders and advises how one has to behave and what the man has to do who is going to lead a life according to the will of God. So we find in the law instructions to stand fast in the faith, to endure persecutions; in our social life to honour one another, to obey the authorities; we get instruction about the relation between parents and children, and so on. The law is a criterion, a common sign of the disciples of Christ which shows how they are walking in this world and how they behave towards each other. Although regulating certain cases of life, the essence of it looks on life *as a whole* without a single exception, and no part of life is beyond its range. This regulation is made in the law not with independent and separate orders as if in a form of a criminal code, but in giving one single law for the whole life from which every special precept can be deduced. And in this the Law of Christ incomparably differs from every human law and regulation in that human law gives only separate regulations; Christ regulates with one law the whole of life.

It is an important question how Christian Education is using law. Here we must see that in education, law cannot be considered from a *legalistic and moralistic* point of view. The commandments given to the child must not be looked upon as outward regulations but as standing on the basis of the grace and the remission of sins. The deeds of obedience are not merits or virtues with which the child can stand before God, but the fruits of grace, the works of the Holy Spirit in the soul. Therefore the works of man have their *limit* and this limit is human sin which makes them imperfect and weak, not only inadequate to the will of God but even such that they are signs of the sinfulness of man. So has law also a limit in that, although it contains and shows the will of God, it cannot be obeyed because of sin which through the law not only does not disappear but even becomes the more obvious and terrible. That kind of education which stands on the basis of moralism and ascribes to the works of man a meritorious power mistakes the Gospel for the law. The works, therefore, refer past themselves, as law refers past itself to Christ in whom law was fulfilled and whose

perfect fulfilment of the law is a token of hope in grace. Such works are not of man, who is unable to obey God; they are the works of the Holy Spirit in the soul, the fruits of the faith and thankfulness awakened by God Himself.

In the law and in the works commanded by it we see another form of preaching the Word in education, and so also another method of it besides teaching. This method we will call *practice*. Its task is to preach the claim of God as commandments which regulate the conduct of the child. Although in practice we show to the child the commandments of God as regulating single details of life, we must not forget that their foundation is the first and great commandment: love towards God, which love is the end of the commandment and the fulfilling of the law (Romans xiii. 10), of a pure heart and of a good conscience and of faith unfeigned (1 Timothy i. 5). Practice, therefore, as a method of education cannot stand in itself; its strength and substance come from the love of Christ towards the child for whom Christ endured, in his stead, the judgment of the law and so perfectly fulfilled it. This method, too, refers therefore to Christ the Fulfiller. It looks back to the method of teaching but goes past it, and completes it, showing the doctrine in relation to the life. As well as doctrine, *law*, too, *is an empty frame, unless it contains the living Word*, even it is judgment and condemnation without Christ. As well as teaching, *practice* also *is useless, unless Christ's power is working in it* through the Holy Spirit, without which teaching is only a sign of human weakness and sin, even it is a judgment and condemnation if we try to look to it as justified by itself. *Good works* make a form of Christian life only *when obeying Christ* and looking on Him; *practice* is a form of Christian Education only *when we are looking* not on human laws but *on the living Word of God* made flesh in Christ, whose atonement made possible the impossible—the justification of the unjust man—and made the works of this unjust man acceptable before God. So practice as a method of education points to another form of method, whose task is to show the child even this grace which appeared in Christ.

3. The third form in which the Word is preached in New Testament is *example, show* (typos, hypodeigma, hypogrammos). Christ often used the form of calling the attention to an *example* in His sermons. He likened the Kingdom of God to different

kinds of things in order to point out its different sides and features. In these comparisons, in which some features of the Kingdom are compared (paraballo, parabole) to earthly phenomena, are shown in sensible likenesses things which are above human senses and conceptions. These comparisons are distinguished by the fact that they symbolize the perfect through the imperfect, the infinite through the finite. But at the same time they all meet the difficulty by putting side by side two things which differ wholly from each other : the things of God and those of man. Therefore they are unable to contain the true essence of the Word : they only seek to refer to it.

This difficulty ceases in *Christ's person*. Only He can show perfectly and obviously the Word of God, being Himself the Word which was made flesh. In the historical personality of Jesus, the barrier between God and man was broken down, He being true God and true man in one. Therefore the *true example* of the Word of God, in whom God's will can be seen entirely and without failure, *is alone the personality of Christ*. In Him we see clearly what God is wanting from us, in Him appears before our sinful eyes in visible form, in perceivable events, the redeeming grace of God towards the whole of humanity, in His death, in His atonement for us, in His life as the second Adam, the man in whom the Father is well pleased. This is the reason why Jesus Himself in the Gospels and in other parts of the Bible speaks about the example given to us by Himself. He showed us how we have to behave towards one another with His own example. The Epistles exhort the saints to take the prophets for an example of suffering afflictions and of patience (James v. 10) ; the apostles refer to their own example (Phil. iii. 17 ; 2 Thess. iii. 9), the minister and the elders are asked to be examples to the flock of God (1 Timothy iv. 12 ; 1 Peter iii. 17).

If we now examine the *form* of the example we find that example is always presented *in a human personality*. In such human personalities we see the example of obedience, of thankfulness, of perseverance in sufferings, of faithful life, of walking in faith, or, on the other side, of going out of the way of God and of punishment because of disobedience. Example, therefore, is not an abstract theory or a fabricated event, but God's testimony shown in the history of *nations and individuals*. So in the *contents* of example, although connected with and referring to

single events, we have to find more than a description of a person or narrating of a happening; the contents of the example is always the *inward structure* of the respective personalities. Peter denying Christ and Saul forsaken by God are not single events of their history but examples showing to us the most hidden features of their soul and warning us against unfaithfulness and disobedience. The example shows the love of the children of God towards each other in having compassion for the poor (I Thess. iv. 9), perseverance in afflictions as a fruit of the trust in God (I Peter ii. 21), walking in faith and obedience, as the results of faith. These features of example all spring *from a life grounded on grace*, and all refer to such a life.

From this we see the difference between the example of Christ and that of men. *The example of men is not based upon itself*, its basis is the grace got in Christ. The original example is Christ Himself, only in Him are we able to form and lead our life. Human example is valuable only when it will be justified not by itself—in itself being sinful and weak—but built upon the example of Christ. In man himself there is nothing deserving to be followed or to be taken as example, be he a teacher or a hero or a “creative personality”, man has no right to claim for, or to ascribe to, himself a goodness or rightness of his own. In Christian Education if it stands on basis of the Word, such a claim means practically to displace the Word.

Christ is the only example. Here again we have to see that His example consists not in single deeds or works but in the fact that He is the man in whom the Father is well pleased, who perfectly obeyed the will of God in whom the love of God was shown unto us. In Christ the right man is standing before us who gives His righteousness instead of our sinful being. So in Christ's example we see our sin. This is the limit of the example, human sin, which becomes the more obvious the deeper we reflect upon Christ's personality. His example is not a reassuring, not a peaceful sight for us but rather disappointing and disheartening, showing us how different we are from Him. *The use of the example* in education, the method in which we give example to the child, can be therefore only in referring to Christ, in showing the right man in Christ's personality and causing the child to pray for God's regenerating grace in his sinful life. So this method also refers, as did teaching and practice, to the grace

without which Christ's example remains for us only judgment and condemnation.

Example in education as well as in Christian life is used by being *regarded* and *imitated*. Human examples can be only imitated because they refer only to single facts and they are unable to give a sight of the whole life. Christ's example cannot be imitated, we being unable to copy His works. So the question often put in preaching and in education, "What would Jesus do?" is, from this point of view, a mistake, expressing an opinion as if we could be able to do what He is doing, and forgetting the difference which there is between His human personality and ours. He can be only followed, and even this can be done only by those who are drawn by the Father.

4. These three ways of method in education are *in close connection* and cannot be used or thought apart from each other. Teaching remains only an imparting of an empty doctrine unless it speaks about the redeeming personality of Christ and about the grace in which His disciples are living; the giving an example to the child would be to fix an unattainable aim if the teaching about Christ did not show us the secret of salvation; practice would be a prescription of precept impossible of fulfilment if it did not stand beside teaching about the grace and the example of Christ in whom law was fulfilled and the righteousness in faith and not in works was obtained. The Scriptures, too, refer to this connection. Christ says: "If any man *will do* His will, he *shall know of the doctrine* whether it be of God or whether I speak of myself" (John vii. 17). Doctrine is, therefore, proved and made more clear to us by obedience. That is what Calvin means when he says that the right conviction arises from the fear of God and humbleness towards Him; that for the soul in which the fear of God is dwelling, it is easy to discern the truth of the doctrine, "*rectum iudicium manare ex timore Dei et reverentia excipit . . . si animos habeant ad timorem Dei compositos, facile agnitaros, an verum sit necne quod praedicat*". On the other hand, the origin of the good works is the true knowledge of the Word of God as in the words of Christ above quoted, "*continetur vera pietatis definitio, quum scilicet ad sequendam Dei voluntatem ex animo parati sumus, quod facere nemo potest nisi qui se proprio sensu abdicaverit*". Lastly, obedience has its true foundation in the personality of Christ in

whom only the child can see the unity of the true doctrine and His commandments. All the three methods are so relative to and complementary of each other, standing all three on the basis of the grace.

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